

Binding Mechanism of Model Charged Dye Carboxyfluorescein to Hyaluronan/Polylysine Multilayers

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KEYWORDS: layer-by-layer, adsorption isotherm, polyadsorption, diffusion, fluorescence recovery after photobleaching, hyaluronic acid.

Abstract

Biopolymer-based multilayers become more and more attractive due to the vast span of biological application they can be used for, e.g. implant coatings, cell culture supports, scaffolds. Multilayers have demonstrated superior capability to store enormous amount of small charged

molecules such as drugs and release them in a controlled manner, however, the binding mechanism for drug loading into the multilayers is still poorly understood. Here we focus on this mechanism using model hyaluronan/polylysine (HA/PLL) multilayers and a model charged dye carboxyfluorescein (CF). We found that CF reaches a concentration of 13 mM in the multilayers that by far exceeds its solubility in water. The high loading is not related to the aggregation of CF in the multilayers. In the multilayers, CF molecules bind to free amino groups of PLL, however, intermolecular CF-CF interactions also play a role and i) endow the binding with a cooperative nature and ii) result in polyadsorption of CF molecules as proven by fitting of adsorption isotherm using BET model. Analysis of CF mobility in the multilayers by fluorescence recovery after photobleaching has revealed that CF diffusion in the multilayers is likely a result of both jumping of CF molecules from one amino group to another and movement together with a PLL chain being bound to it. We believe that this study may help in design of tailor-made multilayers acting as advanced drug delivery platforms for a variety of bio-applications where high loading and controlled release are strongly desired.

Introduction

The layer-by-layer deposition of polyelectrolyte multilayers becomes very popular in the last decades due to its simplicity, low costs, automation and reproducibility¹⁻⁷ The method is based on sequential deposition of oppositely charged polymers onto a solid surface.^{1, 3-7} Physical-chemical properties of the multilayers can easily be adjusted to meet various requirements by proper choice of preparation conditions, variation of polyelectrolyte chain length and nature, and by post-modification.⁸⁻¹¹ Furthermore, the multilayers have attracted significant attention since they have been shown to serve as good candidates for a number of bio-applications.^{2, 12-24} The

planar multilayers (films) and curved structures (capsules) mostly play a role of reservoirs hosting and releasing numerous biologically active molecules such as nucleic acids, proteins, peptides and so on.^{2, 25-30} Recently a number of reports appeared to demonstrate high capacity of multilayers to host small molecules including drugs and dyes.³¹⁻³³ This makes the multilayers very attractive as bio-coatings (e.g. implant coatings) in order to host bioactive drugs (antibiotics, anticancer drugs, small bio-factors such as growth factors, cytokines, etc.) and release them in a controlled manner, for instance through erosion or biodegradation.

One of the most commonly used methods for loading of bio-molecules of interest into the multilayers is the post-loading - incubation of the as-prepared multilayers in the solution of a bioactive agent. Simple dyes are often used as model molecules to mimic behavior of a real drug. Additionally, model dyes such as CF or rhodamine can be directly monitored by fluorescence or absorbance. In some cases, the capacity of multilayer to store a dye is determined by nature of the last polyelectrolyte layer deposited.³⁴ Fluorescently labeled paclitaxel was homogeneously distributed throughout multilayers composed from hyaluronic acid (HA) and poly-L-lysine (PLL).³³ Likewise, it was possible to load anti-inflammatory drug diclofenac into crosslinked multilayers, and the amount of the stored drug can be tuned by the multilayer thickness/number of layers.³⁵ Furthermore, the same study showed that paclitaxel loaded into multilayers was effective in killing cells with the efficiency of about 90%. Variation of the number of layers affects both loading and release rate of the loaded molecules.³⁶

High water content in the biopolymer-based multilayers along with their structural properties allows one to load large macromolecules such as proteins (albumin, lysozyme, others^{28, 37} and nucleic acids.^{29, 30} Full exploitation of these films for bio-applications (cell culture and tissue engineering) requires that these systems should offer a controlled release of the stored molecules.

The trigger for the release can be a change in physical-chemical properties of the multilayers or environment changes: temperature, pH, composition, ionic strength, hydrolysis, light, etc.³⁸⁻⁴³ These stimuli can be employed for both short term³¹ and long term⁴⁴ release. Though the possibilities for applications and control over loading and release performance are countless, the mechanism of storage/release of small molecules/drugs in the multilayers is still not well understood and a number of reports on loading and release of small drugs show high interest for this topic.^{32-34, 36, 45, 46}

It has recently been demonstrated that small charged dyes can be loaded into the biopolymer-based multilayers in enormous concentrations.⁴⁷ This concerns not only model dyes such as CF and rhodamine but also biologically relevant small charged molecules adenosine triphosphate (ATP) which is of particular interest due to its well-known role in bio-energy storage and conversion. A number of reports focus on investigation of ATP loading and release into/from surface films employing the energy of ATP hydrolysis,⁴⁸ electrochemically stimulated release,⁴⁹ ATP-induced self-assembly,⁵⁰ loading into layered double hydroxides through intercalation of ATP and other nucleotides.⁵¹ More complex self-assembled ATP-containing structures have also been reported based on metal nanoparticles and block copolymers with bioinspired binding units.^{52, 53}

The multilayers which have been given enormous attention as a model system are assembled from model biopolymers HA and PLL. These films can easily reach up to a few micrometers in thickness or even tens of micrometers due to exponential-like growth character⁵⁴⁻⁵⁷ and thus offer considerable reservoir capacity.⁴⁷ HA/PLL multilayers can be used as supports for cell culture,^{58, 59} Bearing in mind their high storage capability, these multilayers are perfect candidates as drug delivery systems for cellular applications. However, in order to comprehend their delivery

potential, it is of immense importance to understand the mechanism by which a drug is withheld in the multilayers.

In this paper we focus on binding mechanism of small charged fluorescent dye CF to the HA/PLL multilayers assembled by dipping technique.. Spectral characteristics of CF along with its mobility and adsorption equilibrium capacity in the multilayers are analyzed and used as major indicators for assessment of CF binding to multilayers. We firmly believe that better understanding of the binding mechanism of small dyes such as CF could be used to design novel effective polymer-based systems with tuned loading and release characteristics required for cutting-edge drug delivery and tissue engineering applications.

Materials and methods

Chemicals

Sodium hyaluronate (HA, 360 kDa, #HA500K) was purchased from Lifecore Biomedical (USA) and Hellmanex II (#9-307-010-507) from Hellma GmbH (Germany). Poly-L-lysine hydrobromide (PLL, 15-30 kDa, #P7890), polyethylenimine (PEI, 110 kDa, #306185), 5(6)-carboxyfluorescein (CF, #21877), TRIS, NaCl, and HCl were supplied by Sigma Aldrich (Germany). All chemicals were used as received, without further purification.

Assembly of HA/PLL multilayers

HA/PLL films were assembled on 12 mm round glass slides using automated dip coating machine according to the protocol described elsewhere.⁵⁹ Briefly, after washing with Hellmanex II, 14 mm round glass slides were immersed for 10 min in 1 mg/mL PEI, followed by washing in 10 mM TRIS buffer containing 15 mM NaCl, pH 7.4 (further TRIS-buffer) for three times. After that slides were immersed for 10 min in 0.5 mg/mL HA, washed three times in the buffer,

immersed in 0.5 mg/mL PLL, and again washed three times in the buffer. HA/PLL deposition step was repeated 24 times. The films were always terminated with PLL as the outmost layer.

Loading the multilayers with CF and analysis of CF fluorescence

Loading of HA/PLL multilayers was achieved by incubating the HA/PLL in 1 mL of 1 μ M solution of CF in TRIS-buffer in darkness for 24h. Loading efficiency and released amount of the loaded compound were determined by analysis of fluorescence in the supernatant.

Fluorescence emission spectra of CF solutions in pure buffer and in the buffer containing PLL were taken at 492 nm excitation. Concentration of CF was kept fixed at either 5 μ M or 300 μ M, and PLL concentration was varied to obtain different ratios between a number of lysine units ($M_r = 209$) in PLL and CF molecules (molar charge PLL:CF ratio). Furthermore, fluorescence emission spectra of CF loaded in the (HA/PLL)₂₄ multilayers were determined - the multilayers were loaded with CF by incubation in 1 μ M CF. The measurement was done at 1 min and 60 min after immersion of the multilayers into the TRIS-buffer in the cuvette - immersion moment is considered as the start of the release.

Real-time observation of the loading was done by online measurement of CF fluorescence in solution where the (HA/PLL)₂₄ multilayers were incubated. The experiment was done in quadruplicate. The amount of CF loaded in the multilayers was determined as the difference in the amount of CF measured in aliquots taken from the solution with the multilayers and the control one (without the multilayers, bar cover slip used instead).

Analysis of CF diffusion in multilayers by FRAP

The diffusion coefficient and the amount of immobile fraction were assessed by evaluation of data resulting from fluorescence recovery after photobleaching (FRAP) experiment. In general the photobleaching may have an effect on chemical structure of a fluorescent dye that may affect

it interaction with surroundings. However, the FRAP is well acceptable method to assess mobility of fluorescent probes like CF and this is why we used this method in this study. The experimental procedure and the data evaluation procedure were similar to procedures described elsewhere⁶⁰ but using planar multilayers. Glass slides with deposited multilayers containing CF were mounted into a holder, covered by a layer of TRIS-buffer to protect them from drying and placed under confocal laser scanning microscope (Zeiss LSM 510 meta / Axiovert 200M, Germany). Using a 63x/1.4 objective the sample was bleached by the 488 nm laser line of an Ar-ion laser at its full power and scanned by highly attenuated laser power. Scanning area spanned 73.12 μm x 73.12 μm (512 pixel x 512 pixel) and bleached area spanned 73.12 μm x 2.14 μm (512 pixel x 15 pixel). A proper z-position was determined as a position of the highest intensity of the fluorescence signal. The sample was primarily twice scanned, afterwards bleached (by scanning the laser 50 times over the bleached area resulting into a dip of fluorescence signal) and then again 30 times scanned. Time span between following images was 2 s, scanning time per pixel was 3.2 μs . The evaluation procedure of acquired data was based on analytical solution of Fickian diffusion.⁶¹ The evaluation of immobile fraction amount is based on analysis of the dip depth as a function of time. The measurements were repeated six times. The details of the evaluation procedure are given below.

The raw images from FRAP experiment were primarily cropped (to limit edge effects) and averaged (ImageJ, W. Rasband, NIH) in direction perpendicular to direction of diffusion. Resulting one dimensional FRAP profiles were transferred into a spreadsheet template (MS Excel) for data corrections and analysis. The set of profiles resulting from a single FRAP experiment were normalized to pre-bleach fluorescence intensity, corrected to inhomogeneity of local fluorescence, corrected to unwanted bleaching and edge effect in other dimension.

Every FRAP profile is fitted by a Gaussian curve defined as:

$$I(x, t) = I_0(t) - A(t) \cdot \exp\left(-\frac{x^2}{2w^2}\right) \quad \text{Eq 1}$$

where $I(x, t)$ is the fluorescence intensity at a distance x from the dip and a time point after bleaching t , $I_0(t)$ is the fluorescence intensity of the background (ideally its value is constant and close to 1), $A(t)$ is the depth of the dip at the time point t , w describes the width of the Gaussian between inflexion points. All four parameters are free for fitting with every separate FRAP profile. The fitting is performed as a minimization of the sum of squared residuals. After fitting the Gaussian function into FRAP profiles, the diffusion coefficient D is evaluated as a half of slope of the plot w^2 versus t :

$$D = \frac{w^2}{2t} \quad \text{Eq 2}$$

Only first three points of this plot were used for slope evaluation, because the plot tends to deviate when more than one fraction (e.g. immobile fraction) is present. No change over time of the w^2 (not equal to zero) would indicate the presence of the immobile fraction because of no recovery of the stable fluorescent profile. The slope is influenced already from the onset of the recovery process and thus the resulting D rather represents an average diffusion coefficient.

The dimensionality of diffusion d may be evaluated as a twice slope of the plot $\log(A)$ versus $\log(t+t_0)$:

$$\log(A) = -\frac{d}{2} \cdot \log(t + t_0) + \text{const.} \quad \text{Eq 3}$$

where the newly appeared parameter t_0 refers to a time shift correcting deviations from the approximation of instantaneous bleaching of infinitely thin region. The time shift can be found by varying its value until the plot $\log(A)$ versus $\log(t+t_0)$ becomes linear (here implemented as a maximization of the coefficient of determination of an expected linear function). Because also

this plot tends to deviate when more than one fraction is present, only the first 10 points of the plot were used for evaluation of d .

The relative amount of the immobile fraction K_{rel} is evaluated from the time development of the dip depth $A(t)$ by fitting the function:

$$A(t) = \frac{M}{(4\pi D(t+t_0))^{d/2}} + K \quad \text{Eq 4}$$

where $A(t)$ is the depth of the dip at time point t , M is the overall reduction of fluorescence intensity caused by bleaching, D is the diffusion coefficient, t is time after bleaching, t_0 is time shift correction, d is the dimensionality of diffusion and K is the partial depth of dip attributed to immobile fraction. D and d were taken from the previous evaluation and fixed during fitting. These values tend to be underestimated due to influence of immobile fraction, but their presence is essential during fitting for a good estimation of the amount of immobile fraction. The d value used here is bottom limited to value 1, because values lower than 1 do not reflect reality. M , t_0 and K are free for fitting. The input values $A(t)$ are acquired directly from the FRAP profiles, not from fitting the Gaussian function, because the evaluation of immobile fraction is intended to be independent from the evaluation of D as much as possible.

Afterwards K_{rel} is obtained by relating K to the depth of the dip just after bleaching:

$$K_{rel} = \frac{K}{A_0(t)} \quad \text{Eq 5}$$

where K_{rel} stands for the relative amount of the immobile fraction, K is the depth of the dip attributed to immobile fraction resulting from Eq 4, $A_0(t)$ is the depth of the dip just after bleaching ($t = 0$).

Such an approach to the evaluation of the immobile fraction amount expects that only two fractions are present in the sample – a single mobile fraction with certain D and an immobile one. In other cases the evaluation of the immobile fraction amount gives approximate results.

When the amount of the immobile fraction is known, a contribution of this fraction can be subtracted from raw FRAP profiles. The evaluation procedure can then be repeated with the FRAP profiles free of immobile fraction. Results of this repeated evaluation describe the pure mobile fraction rather than a mixture of the mobile and the immobile fractions.

Results and discussion

Spectral characteristics of CF in solution and in the HA/PLL multilayers

Our previous study has demonstrated that CF can be loaded into (HA/PLL)₂₄ multilayers in TRIS-buffer giving high concentration in the multilayers of at least a few mM.⁴⁷ Incubation of excess of CF with the multilayers (at concentration of up to 100 μ M) at the same conditions has revealed that the saturation concentration of CF in the multilayers is 13 mM. This is far more than CF solubility in the same buffer (about 0.5 mM).

In this work we focus on mechanism of binding of CF to multilayers in order to explain the strong accumulation of CF in the multilayers. Molecular structure of CF and PLL and HA biopolymers used to build the multilayers are presented in Fig. S1. The dye CF possesses a carboxylic group which is deprotonated at the physiological pH and potentially allow the dye to interact with charged polymers through electrostatic attractive forces. Thus, throughout all experiments in this study, TRIS buffer containing rather low concentration of added salt (15 mM) and physiologically relevant pH 7.4 has been used. Low salt concentration is needed to ensure that electrostatic interactions between CF and permanent charges on polymer backbone are not screened by salt counterions.

In order to investigate the interaction of CF with multilayers, fluorescent spectra of CF have been taken in the presence of the polymers from which the multilayers are made of - PLL and

HA. Fig. S2, A demonstrates that HA has no effect on the maximum of CF fluorescence and the presence of PLL results in a shift of the maximum of fluorescence from 512 nm (without PLL) to 514.5 nm (0.5 mg/ml PLL solution). This can be explained by electrostatic binding of the oppositely charged CF to amino groups of PLL and no electrostatic interaction between CF and HA which both carry a negative charge. A variation of PLL:CF molar charge ratio has shown that the red shift of fluorescence maximum (from 512 to 515.5 nm) takes place at the PLL:CF molar charge ratio more than five (Fig. S2, B). The conditions of high excess of PLL can simulate those in the multilayers where PLL may be in much higher excess compared to CF because of high concentration of PLL in the multilayers which can be estimated as 250 mM taking into account that the multilayers have about 80% of water, molar charge ratio between PLL and HA of about two, and 46% of amino groups of PLL are free, i.e. unpaired with HA.⁶²

Apart from the binding of CF to amino groups of the PLL, CF is prone to aggregation due to its core hydrophobic part of the molecule. Considering this, one can propose three potential models of CF binding to multilayers as shown in Fig. 1. The model A suggests that only CF-CF interactions take place in the multilayers. This may be reasonable because the CF concentration in the multilayers is by far surpasses the solubility of CF in buffer discussed above. Such a high concentration may be explained by formation of CF aggregates if one assumes that CF-CF interaction is stronger than CF-PLL interaction. Contrary to the first model, the model B assumes that the energy gain for formation of CF-PLL is higher than that of the CF-CF interaction and suggests that no aggregate formation occurs and CF is solely bound to PLL and is also homogeneously distributed throughout the film. The third model C is basically a combination of the previous two models A and B, and is based on an assumption that both CF-CF and CF-PLL interactions take place.

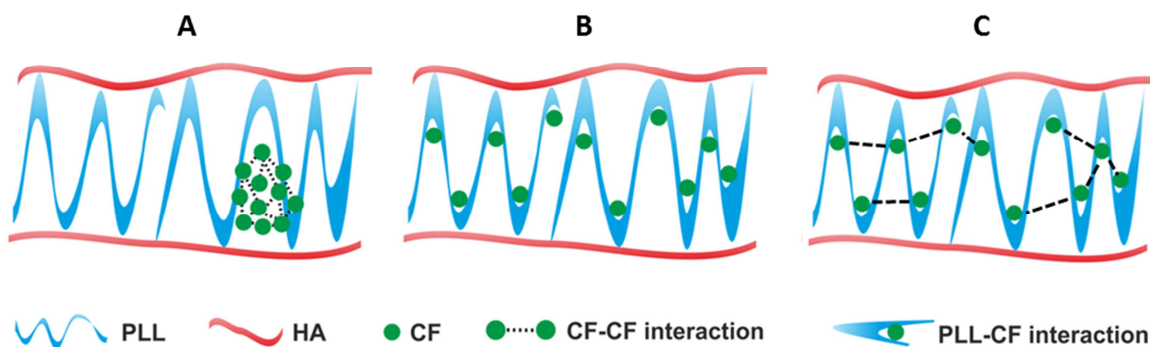


Figure 1. Schematic illustration of the three models (A-C) representing binding of CF to the HA/PLL multilayers. (A) CF forms aggregates within multilayers; (B) CF is solely bound to amino groups of PLL and is equally distributed throughout the multilayers; (C) CF is primarily bound to PLL but CF-CF interactions takes place.

Further the CF-loaded multilayers and CF solutions have been analyzed to reveal which model can better describe the mechanism of binding of CF to the multilayers. Fluorescence spectra of CF in the buffer, CF loaded in the multilayers, and CF released from the multilayers are shown in Fig. 2. One can compare the emission maximum of the spectra and take it as a measure of CF aggregation and/or CF-PLL interaction. About 70% of CF stored in the multilayers is released out after one hour incubation in a fresh buffer solution.⁴⁷ Therefore we have analyzed the CF spectra in the multilayers at the beginning of the release process (1 min incubation in the buffer) when almost all CF molecules should still be present in the multilayers and after one hour of incubation when the majority of CF molecules already left the multilayers (Fig. 2A). One can see that CF molecules stored in the film have identical emission maximum regardless of the incubation time point and it is about 516 nm. In comparison, CF released to the buffer has the maximum emission of 512 nm. This wavelength is similar to that of free CF in solution at rather low CF concentration of 1 μ M and is the same as in the stock solution used in this experiment for CF loading into the multilayers (Fig. 2B). However, CF solution at higher concentration of 500

μM gives the emission maximum of 525 nm indicating an effect of CF concentration on the fluorescence emission maximum.

These findings allow one to conclude that CF released from the multilayers is in a free state (non-aggregated), however, in the multilayers its emission maximum is shifted to higher wavelengths of about 516 nm. To understand the reason of the shift, we have considered an effect of CF concentration on its emission maximum more in detail. Fig. 2C shows that an increase of CF concentration in solution results in progressing red shift of emission maximum up to 525 nm. This is obviously because of CF-CF interactions, i.e. formation of CF aggregates in solution.^{63, 64} CF is becoming insoluble in TRIS-buffer at concentration of more than 500 μM .

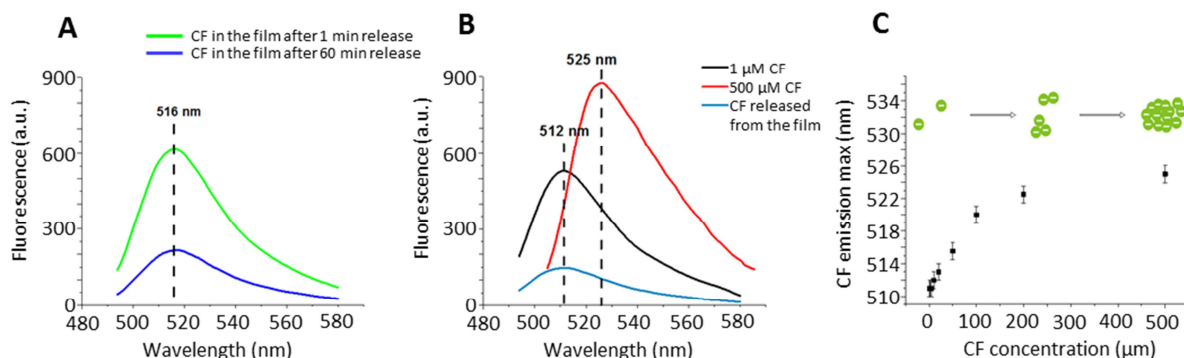


Figure 2. (A) - Fluorescence spectra of CF-laden (HA/PLL)₂₄ multilayers incubated in TRIS-buffer for 1 and 60 min. (B) - Fluorescence spectra of 1 and 500 μM CF solution in TRIS-buffer as well as CF released from multilayers after 60 min incubation in the buffer. (C) - Fluorescence emission maximum as a function of CF concentration in TRIS-buffer.

The results discussed above and presented in Fig. 2 clearly show that although concentration of CF in the film is in the range of a few mM it has emission maximum at 516 nm, much below 525 nm which is the emission maximum of less concentrated 0.5 mM CF saturated solution in buffer. Additionally, there are no other peaks identified for CF stored in the film, apart from the 516 nm,

meaning that only one CF population is present. It would then not be misleading to conclude that there are no pure CF aggregates in the multilayers. This means that the first model A (Fig. 1) is not feasible and that it is either model B or C.

In order to assess the strength of CF-PLL and CF-CF interactions and make it reliable to CF microenvironment in the multilayers, we have performed experiments in solution where highly concentrated CF solution (0.3 mM, comparable concentration as in multilayers) has been titrated with PLL (Fig. 3). At no PLL present (at zero PLL:CF molar charge ratio) the maximum of emission of CF is about 525 nm that is caused by CF aggregation as we discussed above (Fig. 2C). The wavelength maximum of emission progressively increases to about 547 nm until the molar charge ratio of 5. At higher molar ratio, the emission maximum decreases back to about 530 nm (at the molar charge ratio of 42). The fluorescence intensity measured behaves opposite having a minimum at the PLL:CF molar ratio of 5.

The results obtained are explained schematically in the same figure above the graph (Fig. 3). Addition of positively charged PLL induces an interaction between the negatively charged CF aggregates making the aggregates larger. This increases a number of CF-CF interactions that results in significant reduction of fluorescence due to self-quenching of CF molecules and significant increase of the red shift of the fluorescence emission maximum. Both the red shift and self-quenching are phenomena related to intermolecular CF-CF interactions, i.e. between π -electrons of CF molecules.^{63, 64} At the PLL:CF molar charge ratio more than 5, high excess of PLL results in destruction of the formed aggregates and formation of the PLL-CF complex. This, in turn, enhances the fluorescence and reduces the red shift due to disruption of CF aggregates. The PLL:CF molar charge ratio higher than 42 has not been tested because of the need of highly concentrated PLL solution. But we hypothesize that at higher PLL concentration the red shift

will be further reduced down to the emission maximum of 516 nm as has been found for PLL-CF complex at low CF concentration but high PLL excess (Fig. S2, B).

The results above allow one to conclude that PLL-CF interaction should dominate at an excess of charged amino groups of PLL compared to carboxylic ones for CF. This is what most likely happens in the multilayers loaded with CF because in the multilayers the concentration of overall charges of PLL (about 250 mM) significantly exceeds the concentration of CF (13 mM). According to the results presented above, it can be concluded that the CF binding in the multilayers can be described by models B or C (Fig. 1). At the same time, CF environment in PLL solution and inside the multilayers may be different (e.g. due to presence of HA) and further analysis of CF-multilayer binding has been performed to better understand the binding mechanism and reveal the model of the binding (Fig. 1).

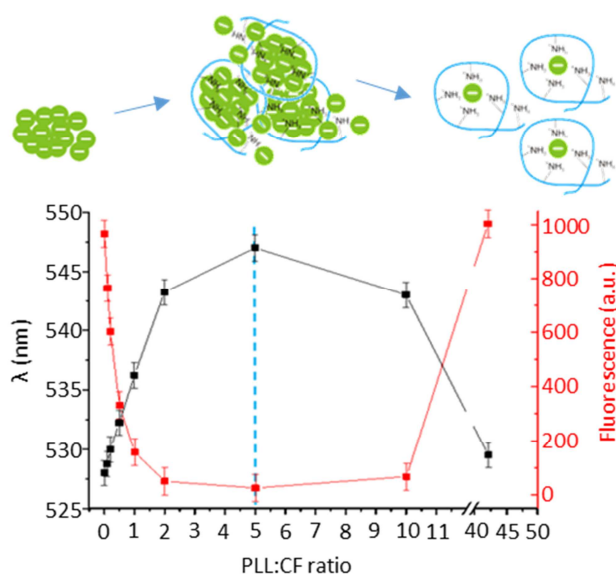


Figure 3. Dependence of the emission maximum and fluorescence intensity of a mixture of PLL and CF at different PLL:CF molar charge ratio. The interrupted vertical blue line represents the threshold at which the spectral features are reversed. Schematics above the graph demonstrates the proposed mechanism of binding of CF and PLL at increased PLL:CF molar charge ratio.

Analysis of CF diffusion into the multilayers

A series of FRAP experiments have been conducted to check the mobility of CF in the film. This may help to understand the interaction of CF and PLL. A mean CF diffusion coefficient (D_{CF}) and an amount of immobile CF fraction were estimated from these experiments (Fig. 4). The resulting diffusion coefficient is an average diffusion coefficient of all CF fractions presented in our sample and was found to be $1.3 \pm 0.6 \mu\text{m}^2/\text{s}$. The amount of immobile fraction refers to the CF fraction which seems to be immobile on a timescale of our experiment ($D < 0.01 \mu\text{m}^2/\text{s}$). The immobile fraction was found to be about $9 \pm 10\%$ of the total CF presented in the multilayers. One can compare the found D_{CF} in multilayers and D of PLL analyzed by similar FRAP approach.⁶⁵ The mean D_{CF} is similar to the D_{PLL} for the fastest PLL fraction which is about $1 \mu\text{m}^2/\text{s}$. Three PLL diffusive fractions were found in the multilayers.⁶⁵ Slower fractions of PLL have also been identified but their contribution into the mean D_{PLL} measured will not be significant because the second diffusive fraction is much slower (about $0.1 \mu\text{m}^2/\text{s}$) than the fastest one. The third fraction of PLL is immobile (D below $0.001 \mu\text{m}^2/\text{s}$) but its content in the multilayers (30-40%) is much higher than that for CF found here (9%).

The results above suggest that CF diffusion in the multilayers is most probably a result of both:

- i) free diffusion of CF through jumping of CF molecules from one PLL backbone to another and
- ii) diffusion of CF molecules together with PLL chains (bound to PLL backbone). These results corroborate well with our previous findings based on analysis of CF release from multilayers as a function of the multilayer properties.⁴⁷

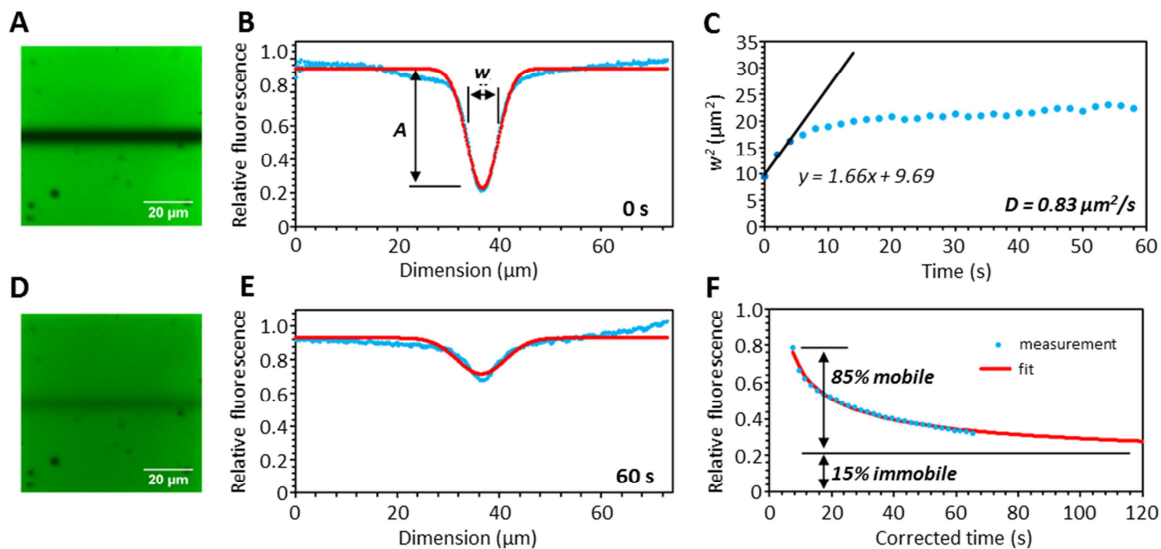


Figure 4. (A) and (D) - fluorescence images of CF-loaded multilayers at 0 and 60 s after photobleaching, respectively. (B) and (E) - fluorescence recovery profiles corresponding to the images A and D, respectively (perpendicular to the bleached back area in the images). The profiles are presented in blue and the fitted Gaussian functions in red. (C) - graph showing the evaluation of diffusion coefficient (D). D is determined as a half of slope of the first three points of the plot w^2 versus t (squared width of dip versus time). At later time the curve starts to deviate from initial trend because of the presence of immobile fraction. (F) A graph presenting evaluation of an amount of the immobile fraction. The relative dip depth is plotted against time. Afterwards a function describing this relationship (red) is fitted into the experimental data (blue) and extrapolated to infinity to get the amount of immobile fraction. Of note, small black spots in the images A and D are artefacts and are not related to the FRAP procedure.

To further understand the binding of CF to the multilayers, kinetics of CF interaction with the multilayers has been assessed at increased CF concentrations (Fig. S3). From these results the adsorption isotherms have been constructed and fitted by six well-known adsorption models based on equilibrium adsorption process, i.e. Langmuir, Freundlich, Langmuir-Freundlich,

Temkin, Sigmoidal Langmuir and Brunauer–Emmett–Teller (BET) models⁶⁶ (Table 1). The main characteristics of the models are summarized in Table S1. Briefly, only Langmuir model is based on assumption of formation of a monolayer (monoadsorption) and all other models assume each adsorbed molecule provides a new binding site for another molecule to be adsorbed. All other five polyadsorption models are based on the assumption that either adsorbate (CF) molecules do not interact with each other or the interaction of adsorbate (CF) and adsorbent (HA/PLL film) has cooperative or competitive nature. It is important to note that for these models only Langmuir and BET equations (Table 1) can be derived based on statistical thermodynamics while the other models are empirical.

The data used for fitting was the average of the quadruplicate measurement. As the measure of the fit we used the coefficient of determination (R^2) in order to reveal the model which fits better the experimental results (R^2 closest to a unit). R^2 was calculated using the equation for general case:

$$R^2 = 1 - \frac{SS_{res}}{SS_{tot}},$$

where SS_{res} is the sum of squared residuals, $SS_{res} = \sum_i (y_i - f_i)^2$. It is a parameter to be minimized during the fitting procedure. y stands for input data values, f stands for predicted values. SS_{tot} is the total sum of squares, $SS_{tot} = \sum_i (y_i - y_{av})^2$. y stands for input data values, y_{av} stands for the average value of variable y in our sample. This parameter is proportional to the variance of y .

Table 1. Comparison of six adsorption models⁶⁶ used to fit adsorption isotherms for CF loading into (HA/PLL)₂₄ multilayers (Fig. 5).

Model	Mathematical equation	Fitted parameters	R ²
Langmuir	$C_{film} = \frac{C_{filmmax} \cdot K \cdot C_{sol}}{1 + K \cdot C_{sol}}$	$K = 0.35 \pm 0.13$	0.538
Freundlich	$C_{film} = K \cdot C_{sol}^{\frac{1}{n}}$	$K = 224 \pm 210$ $n = 0.5 \pm 0.1$	0.899
Langmuir–Freundlich	$C_{film} = \frac{C_{filmmax} \cdot (K \cdot C_{sol})^{1/n}}{1 + (K \cdot C_{sol})^{1/n}}$	$K = (1.4 \pm 1.8) \cdot 10^{-4}$ $n = 0.19 \pm 0.12$	0.854
Temkin	$C_{film} = A \cdot \ln C_{sol} + B$	$A = 3924 \pm 895$ $B = 724 \pm 258$	0.767
Sigmoidal Langmuir	$C_{film} = \frac{C_{filmmax} \cdot K \cdot C_{sol}}{1 + K \cdot C_{sol} + S/C_{sol}}$	$K = (3.8 \pm 0.2) \cdot 10^4$ $S = (3.6 \pm 2.8) \cdot 10^5$	0.737
BET	$C_{film} = \frac{C_{mono} \cdot K \cdot C_{sol} \cdot C_{sat}}{(C_{sat} + (K - 1) \cdot C_{sol}) \cdot (C_{sat} - C_{sol})}$	$C_{mono} = 1909 \pm 787 \mu M$ $K = 27 \pm 8$ $C_{sat} = 7.5 \pm 0.4 \mu M$	0.966

C_{sol} is the concentration of CF in solution; C_{film} is the concentration of CF in the film; $C_{filmmax}$ is the maximum concentration of CF in the film (this parameter was fixed for the fitting procedure at $13.1 \pm 1.2 \text{ mM}$ based on the experimental results); C_{mono} is the maximum concentration of CF per one deposited layer; C_{sat} is the maximum concentration of CF in solution; K , A , B , S and n are parameters of the fitting. Fitted parameters are presented as average \pm SD for $n = 4$ experiments.

It should be noted that the experimental adsorption isotherm has a clearly defined region of saturation (Fig. 5). This was taken into account by fixing the parameter $C_{filmmax}$ at $13.1 \pm 1.2 \text{ mM}$. By the same token, Freundlich, Temkin and BET equations were fitted until the saturation plateau.

Fig. 5A presents the fitting of experimental results of the CF loading into the multilayers by three abovementioned adsorption models which provided the best fitting results (correlation coefficient $R > 0.90$), i.e. BET, Freundlich, and Langmuir-Freundlich models. Adsorption isotherms for three other models (Langmuir, Sigmoidal Langmuir and Temkin) which show $R < 0.90$ are given in Figure 5B.

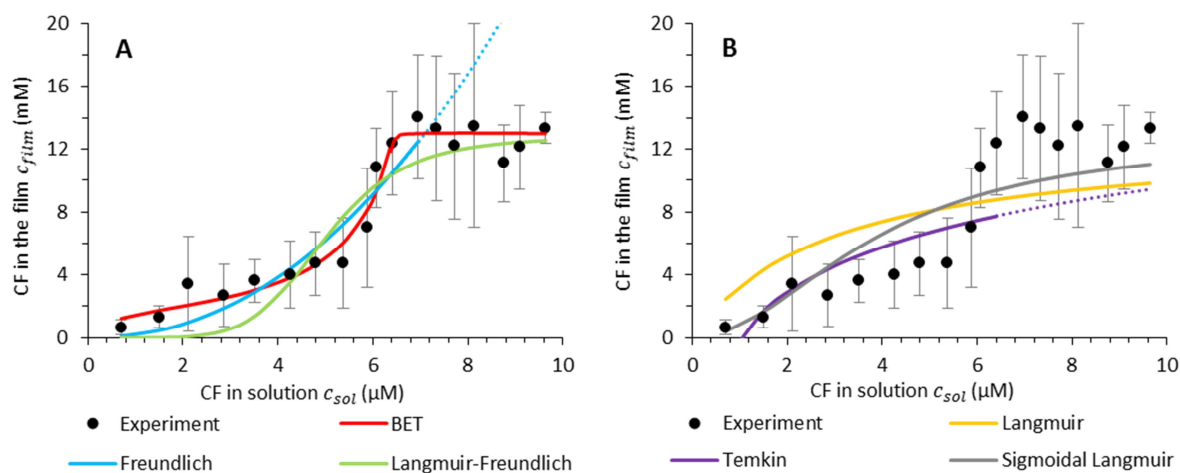


Figure 5. Fitting of the adsorption isotherm (SD are given for $n=4$) obtained for CF loading into (HA/PLL)₂₄ multilayers by (A) - BET, Freundlich and Langmuir-Freundlich, (B) – Langmuir, Sigmoidal Langmuir and Temkin adsorption models.

The best fit was found for BET model (R^2 value equals 0.966). This indicates that the interaction of CF with (HA/PLL)₂₄ multilayers is likely according to assumptions on which BET model is based upon. Considering five general types of BET adsorption isotherms which are known (Table S2), CF loading into the multilayers can be described in the best way by S-shaped Type V adsorption isotherm. S type of the isotherm suggests cooperative adsorption, when the binding of adsorbate molecules to the adsorbent depends on the concentration of adsorbed molecules – in other words, binding of two adsorbate molecules to the adsorbent is not independent.⁶⁷ The binding of one molecule increases the affinity for the binding of the next

molecule.⁶⁷ At the same time, type V of BET isotherm refers to the polyadsorption of CF molecules to equivalent binding sites. This means that each CF molecule adsorbed to PLL backbone provides a new site for the adsorption of the molecule in the layer above it and the anchorage to two types of binding sites (NH_3^+ group or CF molecule) is characterized by the same or closed adsorption energy, i.e. binding sites within the film are equivalent. Proposed integrated mechanism of adsorption is schematically represented in Fig. 6. This proves that the most suitable model to describe binding of CF to HA/PLL multilayers is the model C proposed in Fig. 1.

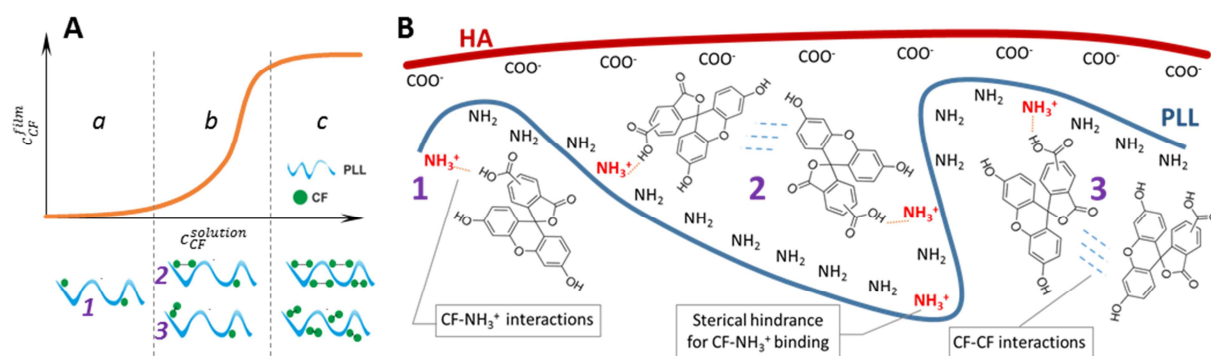


Figure 6. (A) – S-shaped isotherm of CF adsorption into HA/PLL multilayers and schematics of CF-PLL and CF-CF interactions in the multilayers as a function of CF concentration in solution. (B) - schematic presentation of PLL backbone interacting with CF molecules. Both ion pairs and intermolecular CF-CF interactions play a role, however, not all the amino groups can be bound to CF due to either sterical factor or reduced number of charged amino groups due to significantly lower apparent pK_a of PLL in the multilayers compared to that in solution.

According to the schematics in the figure above, first molecules of CF loaded into the multilayers bind to amino groups of PLL and do not interact with each other (Fig. 6, case 1). This type of binding is driven through PLL-CF interaction and is apparently predominant at low concentration of CF in solution (zone a). As CF molecules keep entering the film (zone b), apart

from binding to PLL, they interact with each other. CF molecules which are anchored to the film either strengthen the binding of upcoming CF molecule via CF-CF interaction (cooperation, case 2) or act as new binding sites for CF molecules which are coming from the solution (case 3). At the same time, there is no clustering of CF molecules to each other (aggregation) as proven earlier (Fig. 2), the interaction is presumably between two CF molecules. At high concentration of CF (zone c), all possible binding sites will be occupied resulting in saturation of the multilayers with CF molecules and reaching a plateau on the adsorption isotherm. Fig. 6 illustrates two extreme cases when either only cooperative mechanism (case 2) or only polyadsorption (case 3) is realized. However, we suppose that both cases take place simultaneously.

Interestingly, the number of occupied binding sites is less than the total number of free amino groups of PLL in the multilayers. One can notice that the molar charge ratio PLL:CF is about 20 (CF maximum concentration in the multilayers is 13 mM (Fig. 5) and the total concentration of amino groups of PLL is about 250 mM as we calculated above). This can be explained either by sterical factors or reduced number of charged amino groups available for interaction with CF in the multilayers. Sterical factor may mean that the CF-PLL interaction can only be realized if CF can find PLL amino group properly oriented in the space to make an ion pair with it (Fig. 6B). One cannot expect significant sterical limitations for CF molecule to reach a backbone of PLL because the HA/PLL multilayers are highly hydrated (about 80% of water) and about a half (46%) of amino groups of PLL are unpaired with HA (free to interact with CF).⁶² In addition, CF molecule is a small compact molecule allowing free diffusion in the hydrated and bulky multilayers. However, the PLL is highly flexible polymer, it can intertwine making the access of CF to amino groups of PLL difficult.

A limited number of charged amino groups can be another reason to be considered. The reduced pK_a of PLL in HA/PLL mult

ilayers has been reported.⁶⁸ Both HA and PLL are becoming weaker acid and weaker base being in the multilayers compared to their strength in solution. The changes in the pK_a are significant and may be of a few pH units. The authors⁶⁸ have reported that in the multilayers assembled at pH 7.0, HA changes its pK_a from 3.8 to 4.9 and pK_a of PLL is significantly decreased from 9.4 to 6.8. This is related to ability of the polymers to change their secondary structure and increase a degree of conformational order upon adsorption to the multilayers. At pH 7.0 in the multilayers HA remains still fully negatively charged (pK_a much below than 7.0) but the charge density of PLL can be significantly reduced due to much lower pK_a value in multilayers, i.e. 6.8. This may explain why CF does not interact with all amino groups of PLL available in the multilayer but only with rather small number of the groups which still carry a charge. One can speculate that both sterical factor and reduction of apparent pK_a of PLL can play a role.

We believe that the physical-chemical approaches employed here to understand CF interaction with HA/PLL multilayers may be helpful to assess the interaction of real drugs with multilayer films and thus open new perspectives to make advanced bio-coatings with tunes loading and release of drugs. One would expect that some real drugs such as anticancer drug doxorubicin may possess stronger intermolecular interaction between drug molecules due to a hydrophobic nature of the drug and no charge. The same approach used here may be used for doxorubicin loaded into the multilayers. The aspects of drug or biomolecule (e.g. ATP, doxorubicin) release from HA/PLL multilayers will be referred to in our upcoming research.

Understanding the drug-multilayer interaction is a key for the design of new multilayer-based drug delivery systems because this interaction will drive drug release performance. The proper choice of the multilayer constituents (two or more polymers such as blend multilayers) will dictate the release rate allowing to get desired release profile, e.g. burst or prolonged release or more complicated. In addition, knowledge on the molecular binding to the multilayers may help to engineer free-standing multilayer shells enabling protective characteristics⁶⁹ through controlled shell permeability governed by the interaction of molecules from outside with the capsule shell. We believe that the results of this study performed at salt concentration below physiological salt concentration will be helpful for the design of novel multilayer-based drug delivery systems because the salt concentration in the multilayers shall be defined by uncompensated charges in the polymer network of the multilayers if enough amount of the salt (to form counterions) is provided as in this study. However, the interesting aspect related to the salt concentration inside and outside the multilayers and an effect the salt can have to drug loading/release will be considered separately in our future research.

Conclusions

In this study we focused on the binding mechanism of small charged dye CF to biopolymer-based multilayers, namely (HA/PLL)₂₄ multilayers. CF is a popular fluorescent dye often used as a model drug. CF can spontaneously be loaded into the multilayers with very high partitioning coefficient of about 10^4 reaching dye concentration in the film up to 13 mM that is much more than the dye solubility in solution (0.5 mM). The CF loading is driven by binding of CF molecules to free amino groups of PLL in the multilayers. In the multilayers CF-CF interactions take place but do not dominate over CF-PLL interactions giving no aggregates of CF as found by

analysis of CF fluorescence spectra in the multilayers and in solution. The binding of CF to multilayers is cooperative as indicated by S-shaped adsorption isotherm. This means that binding of one CF molecule to the multilayer affects the binding of another one, making the binding of new coming molecule more favorable. At the same time, anchorage of CF takes place in accordance with BET Type V polyadsorption model meaning that CF molecules which are stored in HA/PLL film play a role of new binding sites for new CF molecules. Both mechanisms of adsorption are driven by CF-CF interactions that enhance the binding affinity and strengthen CF-multilayer interaction. Analysis of CF mobility in the multilayers by FRAP has revealed that more than 90% of CF molecules diffuse very fast (diffusion coefficient D of about $1 \mu\text{m}^2/\text{s}$) and the rest is immobile. As reported in literature, mobile PLL has similar D in the multilayers but much higher content of immobile fraction (30-40%).⁶⁵ Based on this one can conclude that CF diffuses in the multilayers through both i) jumping from one amino group to another (at one or different PLL chains) and ii) diffusion together with PLL chains being bound to the chains. This study provides new insights into the multilayer-drug interactions using model fluorescent dye CF. We believe that the developed approach and knowledge received can be further extended and utilized for understanding the mechanism of loading and release of biologically relevant drugs. Elucidation of the storage mechanisms would open a new way that would provide one with knowledge to precisely design tailor-made multilayers well-suitable for applications in drug protection, separation, and controlled release.

ASSOCIATED CONTENT

Supporting Information

The following files are available free of charge: fluorescence emission spectra at different PLL:CF ratio; CF, PLL and HA molecular structure; fluorescence from HA/PLL multilayers during CF loading; detail on mathematical modeling of CF adsorption (PDF).

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Author Contributions

The manuscript was written through contributions of all authors. All authors have given approval to the final version of the manuscript.

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Acknowledgement

DV acknowledges Alexander von Humboldt Foundation (Sofja Kovalevskaja Program), the DFG grant VO 1716/2-1, and Material Research Seed-Corn Fund from NTU for financial support. DS and ES acknowledge the ERC Consolidator-2014 grant ENERCAPSULE for financial support.

Abbreviations

HA, hyaluronic acid; PLL, poly-L-lysine; CF, carboxyfluorescein; ATP, adenosine triphosphate; PEI, polyethylenimine; FRAP, fluorescence recovery after photobleaching; BET, Brunauer–Emmett–Teller.

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Table of Contents graphic

